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ANALYSIS

Shifting Social Cleavages in Ukraine Against the Backdrop of Full-Scale War

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Abstract

Amid Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine, profound shifts in social cleavages are reshaping Ukrainian society. Previously divisive issues like foreign policy alignment or cultural identity have unified as the external existential threat galvanized national solidarity. However, new social tensions may emerge, for example, disparities between those who remained in Ukraine and those who fled. As Ukraine undergoes this critical transformative period, survey research becomes crucial to understanding new societal dynamics and addressing emerging conflicts.

Major socio-political shocks have the power to, in one fell swoop, make changes to social institutions that would normally take decades. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, unleashed on February 24, 2022, was just such a shock (though not the first one in the history of independent Ukraine, probably already the one with the most significant consequences).

Against the backdrop of such events, social values are undergoing dramatic changes: some old social cleavages are vanishing, while new lines of social conflict are emerging. In times of war, it is extremely important for Ukrainian social scientists to monitor the development of existing and potential lines of internal social conflict. This is important not only because of its scientific relevance, but also for the sake of national security, as Russia, as it had already proven before 2022, will take every opportunity to inflame contradictions within Ukrainian society and between Ukraine's society and government to disrupt national unity, which is essential for the continued effective resistance to Russian aggression.

Vanishing of the Cleavage over Ukraine's Foreign Policy Course

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014—the annexation of Crimea and the de-facto occupation of the Donbas via pro-Russian “People's Republic” puppet regimes—has significantly increased the share of supporters of Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, to the detriment of the supporters of a course towards rapprochement with Russia and the CIS countries. Before the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, supporting Ukrainian accession to NATO was not an very popular opinion, even in the Western and Central regions of Ukraine. In the East and South of Ukraine, however, finding even a single supporter of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration was at that time challenging task.

After Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014, pro-Western views became prevalent in the West and Central regions of Ukraine. In the East and South of Ukraine, a third of citizens now held pro-Western views, but this was still far from a majority. The plurality in these regions were supporters of “non-aligned status of Ukraine.”

Figure 1: Which Way of Guaranteeing the National Security of Ukraine Would Be Best for Ukraine? (April 2012, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Joining NATO	13	38	13.5	6.2	1
Military Union with Russia and Other CIS Countries	26.2	8	17.9	30.5	43.4
Non-Bloc Status of Ukraine	42.1	33.8	44.2	52.1	40.8
Other/Hard to Say	18.7	20.2	24.5	11.1	14.9

The survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Razumkov Center sociological service from March 30 to April 4, 2012. Two thousand nine respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed in all regions of Ukraine, including Kyiv and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, using a sample representative of the adult population of Ukraine in terms of key socio-demographic indicators. The theoretical sampling error (excluding the design effect) does not exceed 2.3% at the 95% confidence level.

This became a stretched term, as the “non-aligned” camp could include: people who simply did not care; rational supporters of non-aligned status; nationalists who liked neither Russia nor the EU; and supporters of Russia who no longer expressed their views openly against the backdrop of the Russian occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

Figure 2: Which Way of Guaranteeing the National Security of Ukraine Would Be Best for Ukraine? (December 2021, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Joining NATO	53.2	81.5	58.7	30.4	29.9
Military Union with Russia and Other CIS Countries	7.6	2.1	5.7	6.7	15.7
Non-Bloc Status of Ukraine	26.1	7.7	20.6	42.1	43.6
Other/Hard to Say	13.1	8.7	15	20.8	10.8

The national survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center sociological service on December 17–22, 2021, in all regions of Ukraine except Crimea and the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Two thousand eighteen respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3% at the 95% confidence interval.

In other words, until Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the cleavage over support for a pro-Russian foreign policy course or Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration remained relevant. This is evidenced first of all by the clear regional polling differences in opinions on this issue.

Secondly, political parties that united the electorate with both pro-European and pro-Russian views also continued to be active in Ukraine in this 2014–2022 period. The Poroshenko-led “European Solidarity” parliamentary party made Euro-Atlantic integration a core concept of its ideology. Zelenskyy’s ruling presidential party “Servant of the People” was also a supporter of pro-European views, although it did not emphasize this as much in its election campaign. “The Opposition Platform—For Life,” in turn, united the electorate with pro-Russian views and, at its peak, in surveys almost caught up with Servant of the People in the fall of 2021 with 17–18% voter support.

However, after Russia’s full-scale invasion, there was no longer any sense in asking respondents the question as it had been formulated earlier (see the chart with the new wording used in the [December 2022 poll](#) below). Moreover, it could have even been dangerous for interviewers, as they could have faced aggression from respondents outraged by the mere fact that the questionnaire contained the option “alliance with Russia.”

Figure 3: Which Option to Guarantee the National Security of Ukraine in the Context of the Russian Aggression Do You Consider Best? (December 2022, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Ukraine’s Joining NATO	48.9	59	51.8	31.3	38.2
Agreement on Strategic Defense Cooperation with the USA	6.7	6.1	7.2	5.3	7.1
Agreement on Strategic Defense Cooperation with Several Allies (e.g., Poland, Baltic states) without the United States	9.3	7.7	9.3	8.7	11.8
Non-Aligned or Neutral Status with International Security Guarantees for Ukraine	8.5	6.5	4.9	13	16.7
Development of own Armed Forces and Defense Industry (Following the Example of Israel or Switzerland)	16.8	11.8	17.9	29.8	14.2
Other	0.4	0.4	0	1	1
Don’t Know	9.4	8.5	8.8	11.1	11

Results of the sociological survey conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center from December 13 to 21, 2022. The face-to-face survey was conducted in territories controlled by the Ukrainian government and where no hostilities were taking place. All in all, 2018 respondents aged 18 years and older were surveyed. The theoretical error in sampling does not exceed 2.3%. At the same time, additional systematic deviations in sampling may have occurred due to the consequences of Russian aggression, in particular the forced evacuation of millions of citizens.

Thus, the “eternal dilemma” of Ukraine’s foreign policy course was finally and unequivocally resolved on February 24, 2022 for the medium-term future. In December 2022, about 79% of Ukrainians supported Ukraine’s accession to the EU, and this number continues to grow, reaching 84% in February 2024. There are still differences between the regions, but these differences are far smaller than they were before the start of the full-scale war.

Figure 4: Do You Support Ukraine’s Accession to the European Union? (December 2022, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Yes	79.3	85.2	83.1	73.6	66.4
No	7.9	4.2	6	12	14.5
Don’t Know	12.8	10.5	10.8	14.4	19.1

The survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation together with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center with the support of the MATRA program from December 13 to 21, 2022. The face-to-face survey was conducted in all regions of Ukraine except for occupied territories and areas where active combat actions were taking place. Overall, 2018 respondents over the age of 18 were surveyed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3% at the 95% confidence interval. At the same time, additional systematic deviations of the sample may have occurred due to consequences of Russian aggression, in particular, the forced evacuation of millions of citizens.

Vanishing Cleavages over Ethno-Cultural Factors of Identity and Historical memory

For many years, the existing contradictions in Ukrainian society regarding cultural factors of identity (language, historical memory, etc.) have been further artificially inflated by Russia. Messages about the “oppression of the Russian language” and “forced Ukrainization” were used to incite hostility between residents of different regions of Ukraine on the basis of cultural identity markers.

To some extent, this was effective. These topics were regularly raised in the public space, leading to heated debates, and a regional split in attitudes toward the state language policy and the policy of historical memory was observed. Even before the full-scale invasion, the majority of people in the Western and Central regions of Ukraine supported the state language policy and, in particular, the introduction of compulsory use of the Ukrainian language in the service sector (in supermarkets, cafes, cinemas, etc.). However, the opposite was true in the South and East of Ukraine:

Figure 5: Do You Support Making Use of the Ukrainian Language Compulsory in the Service Sector? (February 2021, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Fully/Rather Support	54.3	80.8	57.5	37.4	32.6
Rather/Not Support at All	36.1	12.9	30.4	56.2	56
Don’t Know	9.7	6.3	12.2	6.4	11.4

The nationwide survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Center for Political Sociology on February 16–27, 2021. A total of 2003 respondents were interviewed in a sample representative of the adult population of Ukraine (excluding the occupied territories). The sample is representative in terms of gender, age, type of settlement, and region of residence. The maximum random sampling error does not exceed 2.2% at the 95% confidence interval.

Unfortunately, after the outbreak of the full-scale war, this question was never again asked using the same wording in national surveys, though it was asked using a similar wording in regional surveys in Kharkiv and Odesa Regions, which count among the most populated and densely populated regions of the South and East of Ukraine (where negative attitudes toward the state language policy used to prevail). Now, attitudes even in these areas are mostly positive, meaning that there is no longer a significant split on this issue between residents of different regions of Ukraine: see Figure 6 overleaf.

Significant changes have also taken place in the area of historical memory. Without delving into discussions about the assessment of specific events or personalities in the history of Ukraine, let us consider only the attitude of Ukrainians toward the collapse of the Soviet Union, the event that led to the formation of modern independent Ukraine: see Figure 7 overleaf.

As we can see, in 2020, “Soviet nostalgia” prevailed in the South and East of Ukraine. However, in 2022, Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine motivated Ukrainians to rethink the history of their country and reevaluate Russia’s role in it. The formerly diametrically opposed interpretations of the Soviet era of residents of South and East Ukraine vs. those of Central and West Ukraine have disappeared (though some regional differences remain): see Figure 8 overleaf.

Figure 6: How Do You Feel About the Compulsory Use of the Ukrainian Language in the Service Sector (Shops, Cafes, Hairdressers, Entertainment Venues)? (in %)

	Odesa Region (July 2023)	Kharkiv City (September 2023)
Fully/rather positive	59	59
Fully/rather negative	13	13
Indifferent	17	17
Don't know	12	12

The chart presents the results of two polls. The first one was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center sociological service on September 11–21, 2023 in Sumy and Chernihiv Regions, and Kharkiv City using the CAPI method. The regional survey in Odesa Region was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Center for Political Sociology on July 10–21, 2023. In Odesa region, 708 respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed face-to-face. The first study was conducted in the framework of the MATRA program, funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ukraine. The study in Odesa region was funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Project Office Ukraine.

The same applies to a more recent chapter of Ukraine’s history—the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, which resulted in the ouster of the corrupt pro-Russian President Yanukovich from office (and from Ukraine). Russia invested a huge amount of resources to discredit this event through its media channels in Ukraine, framing it as an illegal and fascist/nationalist coup d’état.

Figure 7: In Your Opinion, Was the Collapse of the Soviet Union a Positive or a Negative Event? (August 2020, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Positive	49.1	82.7	53.1	20.7	25.8
Negative	31.7	8.4	27.5	44.8	52.9
Hard to say	19.2	9	19.4	34.4	21.3

The survey was conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center sociological service on August 14–19, 2020 in all regions of Ukraine except Crimea and the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Overall, 2018 respondents were interviewed. The sample is representative in terms of gender, age, type of settlement, and region of residence. The maximum random sampling error does not exceed 2.2% at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 8: How Do You Assess the Collapse of the Soviet Union? (December 2022, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
Very/Some-what Positive	73.3	92.3	71.3	48.3	65.2
Very/Some-what Negative	12	2	12.2	22.9	19.7
Hard to Say	14.6	5.7	16.5	28.8	15.2

The survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center on December 13–21, 2022, in all regions of Ukraine except for Luhansk and Donetsk Regions and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson regions it was conducted in government-controlled areas and areas where no combat actions were taking place. Overall, 2018 respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3% at the 95% confidence interval. At the same time, additional systematic sampling deviations may have occurred due to the consequences of Russian aggression, in particular, the forced evacuation of millions of citizens. The survey was supported by the MATRA program.

Polls before the start of the full-scale war showed that residents of the Center-West of Ukraine had diametrically opposed assessments of the Revolution of Dignity compared to residents of the South and East (see Figure 9 overleaf).

However, after the outbreak of full-scale war, attitudes toward the Revolution of Dignity converged. The South and East of the country in particular experienced increases in the percentage of respondents viewing the movement as a “righteous uprising,” though more in the latter than the former. Nevertheless, even in the South, supporters of the Russian version of the “coup d’état” no longer constitute even a plurality of the population (see Figure 10 overleaf).

Of course, there are valid methodological concerns around comparing responses from macro-regions that are now partially occupied with those from before the full-scale war, when these macro-regions were fully accessible to the survey. However, it is difficult to deny the changes in Ukrainians’ worldview against the backdrop of a full-scale war. The situation no longer exists in which Ukrainians from different regions have diametrically opposed opinions on a number of very sensitive issues, despite the best efforts of Russian interference.

Figure 9: Choose the Interpretation of the Event That Best Reflects Your Personal Opinion: (August 2020, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 and early 2014 were the Revolution of Dignity, a righteous uprising of the people against authoritarian rule	54.1	87.1	64.2	23.3	23.5
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 and early 2014 were an illegal coup d'état, a seizure of power by a group of armed people	30.7	5.8	22.8	49.6	56.1
I disagree with both options/ Hard to say	15.2	7.1	13	27.1	20.3

The survey was conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center sociological service on August 14–19, 2020 in all regions of Ukraine except Crimea and the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Regions. Overall, 2018 respondents were interviewed. The sample is representative in terms of gender, age, type of settlement, and region of residence. The maximum random sampling error does not exceed 2.2% at the 95% confidence interval.

Figure 10: Choose the Interpretation of the Event That Best Reflects Your Personal Opinion: (December 2022, in %)

	Ukraine	West	Center	South	East
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 and early 2014 were the Revolution of Dignity, a righteous uprising of the people against authoritarian rule	66.8	81.9	72.2	36.1	50.4
The events on the Maidan in late 2013 and early 2014 were an illegal coup d'état, a seizure of power by a group of armed people	12.3	5	9.7	24.4	21.8
I disagree with both options/ Hard to say	20.8	13.1	18.1	39.5	27.8

The survey was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center on December 13–21, 2022, in all regions of Ukraine except for Luhansk and Donetsk Regions and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Kharkiv, and Kherson regions it was conducted in government-controlled areas and areas where no combat actions were taking place. Overall, 2018 respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3% at the 95% confidence interval. At the same time, additional systematic sampling deviations may have occurred due to the consequences of Russian aggression, in particular, the forced evacuation of millions of citizens. The survey was supported by the MATRA program.

War-Related Potential Social Cleavages

Despite the fact that the old lines of social conflict are losing their relevance against the backdrop of a full-scale war and that Ukrainian society is more unified than ever before, new lines of social cleavage will, of course, emerge. Currently, we can make hypotheses about potential cleavages based on observations of contemporary social reality and gradually test them in practice.

Some social conflicts can be externally inspired. For example, Russia, through its “bot” network, has already conducted a campaign on Ukrainian social media accusing the central government in Kyiv of using most of the air

defense equipment provided by partner countries to protect the Ukrainian capital, while leaving other cities defenseless against shelling. The effectiveness of such an artificial dividing narrative was not very high, as public opinion polls have shown.

However, one can imagine many other potential lines of conflict that could organically arise as a result of war. Firstly, there may be misunderstandings or divergent perspectives between civilians and the military. This could come in the form of traumatic experiences suffered by military personnel during the war and which civilians do not understand, or, for example, in accusations by the military against civilian men who evaded military service during mobilization.

Secondly, there is an “experience gap” that might lead to tensions between people who stayed in Ukraine and lived under wartime conditions, with its many risks and insecurities, and those who fled to secure, often relatively wealthy countries all over the world. There is already significant scorn for and accusations against citizens who have left Ukraine present on social media. They are accused of taking advantage of the war as an opportunity to leave and build their futures in developed Western countries, instead of defending their homeland. At the same time, their compatriots did not leave their country at its most difficult moment, they lived under shelling and continued to work and support the country’s army and economy.

Thirdly, residents of frontline communities may feel abandoned, the merciless Russian shelling resulting in a completely destroyed sense of security, often no basic utilities, etc. Mutual grievances may also arise between people who lost loved ones/homes/property in the war and those who were not so badly affected by the war, whose relatives evaded military service, etc. Certain decisions of the authorities can also exacerbate domestic contradictions. For example, the idea of excepting citizens who pay a certain amount of taxes from mobilization, which was discussed in the context of a new law on mobilization, is potentially dangerous for the emergence of conflict between wealthier and less wealthy.

Summary

Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine has fundamentally changed the public opinion of Ukrainians. In the face of an existential threat, some factors which traditionally divided Ukrainian society, like foreign policy vector and cultural markers of identity, stopped being polarizing issues.

However, this does not mean that there will be no more social conflicts in Ukrainian society. We can already see the sprouts of new social conflicts and “experience gaps” between the military and civilians, between residents of frontline regions and those far from the front, between those who stayed in Ukraine during the war and those who left. These are just a few of the possible lines of future (and in some cases already existing) social conflicts that will emerge and develop in Ukraine against the backdrop of a full-scale war.







We are convinced that the reader can at this point reasonably assume other lines of internal social conflict in a society that has been struggling for its survival and freedom for more than two years now. Given the current circumstances of rapid and fundamental societal change in the country, survey research is more important than ever in order to track these changes, as well as identify emerging social conflicts and propose ways to address them.

About the Author

Serhii Shapovalov is an analyst at the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DIF) in Kyiv. He researches public opinion trends and coordinates DIF projects in the areas of identity (in particular regarding language policy and national memory policy) and social cohesion.

All surveys quoted in this contribution have been uploaded by the author to the Discuss Data repository and are available in open access: https://www.discuss-data.net/dataset/search/?q=shapovalov&countries=&keywords=&language=s=&categories=&methods_of_data_analysis=&methods_of_data_collection=&disciplines=

Figure 11: Do You Agree with the Statement That the Ukrainian Government Uses Air Defense Systems Provided by Partners Only to Protect Kyiv? (in %)

	Odesa Region (July 2023)	Kharkiv City (September 2023)
Fully/Rather Agree	14 	33 
Fully/Rather Disagree	61 	53 
Don't Know	25 	14 

The chart presents the results of two polls. The first one was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center sociological service on September 11–21, 2023 in Sumy and Chernihiv Regions, and Kharkiv City using the CAPI method. The regional survey in Odesa Region was conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Center for Political Sociology on July 10–21, 2023. In Odesa region, 708 respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed face-to-face. The first study was conducted in the framework of the MATRA program, funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ukraine. The study in Odesa region was funded by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Project Office Ukraine. In Odesa region, 708 respondents aged 18 and older were interviewed face-to-face.